

INTRODUCTION

The act of comprehending text is a complex process. Each individual who interacts with a text brings a different set of prior experiences, reasons for reading the text, and strategies for understanding it. The National Reading Panel acknowledges the complexity of applying comprehension strategies in their description of good readers:

Good readers are purposeful.

Good readers have a purpose for reading. They may read to find out how to use a food processor, read a guidebook to gather information about national parks, read a textbook to satisfy the requirements of a course, read a magazine for entertainment, or read a classic novel to experience the pleasures of great literature.

Good readers are active.

Good readers think actively as they read. To make sense of what they read, good readers engage in a complicated process. Using their experience and knowledge of the world, their knowledge of vocabulary and language structure, and their knowledge of reading strategies (or plans), good readers make sense of the text and know how to get the most out of it. They know when they have problems with understanding and how to resolve these problems as they occur.

However, many current reading comprehension lessons in educational technology tend towards simplifying instruction. Students read a passage and answer test-like questions in a set of lessons which are supposed to exercise a particular kind of reading comprehension strategy.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A key element of a different approach is based on positioning students as “possible knowers” with the teacher through discussion in a dialogically organized setting (Nystrand, et al, 1997)¹. In this setting, understanding of text does not necessarily come from one source (e.g., the teacher in traditional classrooms) but from a transformation of

¹ Nystrand, M, Gamoran, A., Kachur, R, & Prendergast, C. (1997) *Opening Dialogue: understanding the dynamics of language and learning in and English classroom*. New York, NY: Teacher’s College Press.

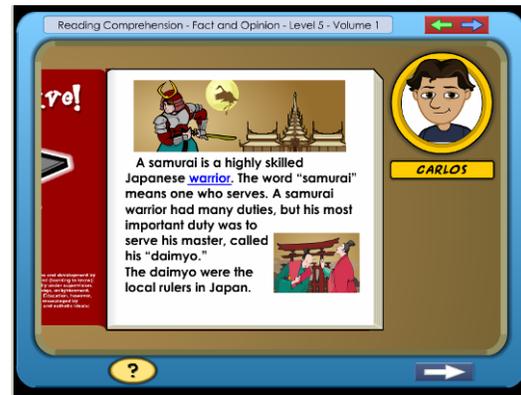


Figure 1: Discussing the Samurai

knowledge through dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981)². This approach assumes that “thoughtful” teacher decision-making that is highly contingent on what students do and say in a conversation can bring textual meaning-making to life for students who have not necessarily seen reading in that light before. This model tends to be more student centered and positions the teacher in less of a role of ‘primary knower’ (Aukerman, 2006³; Aukerman, 2007⁴) It includes the following elements:

- student hypothesizing
- student engagement with each other’s ideas
- moment to moment decision-making
- building upon student understanding

GOALS & OBJECTIVES

We sought to create an animated interactive lesson that assists students in navigating the complexities of the comprehension process and helps them negotiate their understanding of text with many viewpoints. We used a small group discussion format with a main “teacher” character and three “students” to simulate how a real student might participate and react in such sessions. Student ideas and discourse, not pre-set strategies, form the basis for each instructional decision while they discuss a non-fiction passage on the samurai.

² Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

³ Aukerman, M. (2006). “Who’s afraid of the big ‘bad answer’?” *Educational Leadership*, 64(2), 37-41.

⁴ Aukerman, M. (forthcoming, 2007). “When reading it wrong is getting it right: Shared evaluation pedagogy among struggling fifth grade readers.” *Research in the Teaching of English*.

UNIQUE APPROACH

Key differences in this lesson as compared to traditional web-based reading comprehension strategy lessons include the following:

- more authentic activities that integrate sorting and pre-writing replace traditional multiple choice question and answer format
- employs a small-group discussion model as opposed to a narrator/teacher-centered monologic lesson
- the “rightness” or “wrongness” of a particular response is *not* the focus of the lesson. Rather, attempting to follow the students’ thought processes about text is what drives instruction.
- the dialogue, especially between teacher and student characters, strives to be conversational and stays away from ‘teacher-like, test-like’ questions.
- encourages student to share inquiry about text with characters as he/she uses textual evidence to support claims about text

FORMATIVE EVALUATION

Initial feedback from a small sample of parents and students appears to be promising. Six students, ranging in age from 8-14 years, viewed and interacted with the “tutorial” and “graded activity” sections of the lesson. They appeared to enjoy the content and gave high ratings for visual richness and ease of use. They also made comments that indicated they felt like they were part of the class and seemed encouraged when ‘corrective feedback’ was given in a conversational tone that validated their attempt and built upon it. In one session the children even got into discussions with each other about the correct answer or the “degrees of correctness” during and after the lesson. The suggestions for improving the lesson included more activities and ‘speeding things up’ among others. Other ideas such as the addition of ‘game-like’ features that included sword fights between the samurai obviously have to be balanced with the intended school audience.

CONCLUSION

Initial feedback from educators, parents and students indicates that this approach not only shows much promise in instructing students but also in engaging them in active purposeful reading.

Adding other motivational aspects to the lesson would perhaps address the issues of slow pacing that some students found disengaging. Aside from the many advantages of automated, assessment-driven, web-based, differentiated instruction, augmenting a comprehension module that explicitly teaches comprehension strategies, with lessons that follow a dialogically organized approach, may prove to be a powerful tool for struggling readers in school and in extended day environments where reading/literacy specialists let alone certified teachers may not always be available to lead discussions.

To further investigate the utility of this approach it would be essential that future research address the following questions:

- How successful is the simulation of the shared inquiry method compared to a live small group discussion? How can it be made richer?
- Is this a valid approach for struggling readers in upper elementary grades and above?
- How does this type of model compare to other web-based explicit reading comprehension strategy lessons?
- Which approach is more successful in not only determining the ‘mastery’ of the skill but also the engagement of the student?

While studies like those conducted by Martin Nystrand and his colleagues (1997) have shown the positive effects of dialogically organized classrooms across the U.S., further research on the application of this kind of shared inquiry/dialogically organized instruction in an interactive lesson will help identify the utility and feasibility of this approach. However, the “proof in the pudding” will ultimately rest in the success of this approach in assisting students better understand text *and* at helping them become critical thinkers who find value in their opinions.

To view a sample of the lesson go to:
www.learningtoday.com/review

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